

Mark Brennand the Senior Environment Officer of Cumbria County Council was the speaker at the October meeting of the Appleby Archaeology Group. His title “An Archaeological Research Framework for the North West Region” was clarified when he highlighted the “black hole” in our knowledge of prehistory in Cumbria

The Archaeological Research Framework is designed to provide an overview of current archaeological knowledge in the North West of England, where the most significant gaps lie and how those gaps might be filled. It was set up in 2001 by English Heritage and the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers and gave the entire archaeological community the opportunity to share ideas and experience. Detailed work began in 2003 and a report has now been published.

In Cumbria the idea of a framework for archaeology is not new. In 1886 at the inaugural meeting of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society(CWAAS) the Rev John Simpson asked “what do we need to know and how can the knowledge be gained” and in 1932 Robin Collingwood, also of CWAAS asked for an assessment of prehistoric sights in the county. Very little is known about prehistoric Cumbria and the majority of sites that have been recorded, many of them by antiquarians in the 19th and early 20th century, and more recently by landscape survey and aerial photography, have yet to investigated.

The earliest, sparse, archaeological evidence, dates to the Upper Palaeolithic (11000-8000BC). Prior to that time Cumbria was covered by ice and inhospitable. Signs of human activity have been found on the coast. A blade from Lindale Low Cave, now in the museum at Barrow, and the remains of an elk, which had been attacked and wounded by projectiles found near Lancaster have been dated to this period,

Pollen analysis has enabled archaeologists to project what the landscape might have been like over the millennia. Little archaeology has been found from the Mesolithic (8000-4000 BC) but during the period trees, such as birch, juniper and hazel, and later alder, re-colonised the land and these were followed by grasses. Scatters of lithic (stone) material suggest that coastal areas, for example the Esk estuary were being exploited and recent finds of flints indicate activity in the Eden Valley.

Activity is more evident from the start of the Neolithic (4000-2500BC) through to the Bronze Age. (2500-800BC). Pollen analysis indicates that there was less woodland but temporary small scale clearances associated with cereal pollen are evident. Cereal pollen dating to 4000BC has been found at Howgill.

Between 3900BC and 3600BC the number of elm trees declined and it is now thought that this was due to disease. The pattern of small clearances appears to have continued and in Cumbria there is a wealth of evidence for the clearance of stones to form “cairn fields” on the lower fells. Traditionally, these have been associated with the improvement of land for grazing in the Bronze Age.

Although pottery, stone artefacts and considerable evidence of a trade in Langdale polished axes have been found, there is very little evidence of where people were living or of animal husbandry. Sites which are enclosed by banks and ditches are rare in the northwest. A site enclosing the top of Hallam Fell and a possible causewayed enclosure at Green How (i.e. where the banks are discontinuous) have been recorded but both require further investigation.

There is more evidence of burial. The Neolithic was a time of multiple communal burials (often of disarticulated remains) within tombs and long cairns. Many of these sites such as Sizergh are complex and were in use over a long period of time some extending well into the Bronze Age. There is little secure dating evidence for the majority of them. There were small-scale excavations of many of the sites in the 19th and 20th centuries, but more extensive excavation and analysis is required for a better understanding of burial practices. Evidence for funerary cairns and cemeteries is often, but not always, situated close to large stone circles such as Oddendale.

Cumbria does have a considerable number of stone circles. Castlerigg and Long Meg and her Daughters are probably the best known prehistoric monuments in the north west, and they are thought to be amongst the earliest stone circles in the British Isles. However as with so many recorded sites in Cumbria, there is little or no evidence to support these conjectures and further research is needed.

Evidence from the late Bronze age through the Iron Age (800BC-100AD) is again sparse. Recent excavations of a round house at Glencoyne Park date occupation to around 100BC. There are possible upland enclosures which may have been hill forts of a type that are characteristic of the Iron Age elsewhere in England and Wales. However only one of these sites has been dated to the Iron Age. Pollen analysis shows that between 200BC and 200AD there was extensive clearance and open conditions with a rise in cereal pollen, but where did these early farmers live?

Mark concluded by referring to the recent excavation by Appleby Archaeology Group at Brackenber. This will be continued next year and it is hoped the findings will add to our knowledge of Cumbria in late prehistoric times.

Mark was asked many questions before being thanked for his informative talk which had illustrated the need for an Archaeological Framework for our region.

The next talk will be on the Tuesday 11th November at 7.30pm, in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby, when Dot Broughton Finds Liaison Officer (Lancashire and Cumbria will keep us up to date on *Recent Finds in Cumbria*.